



# DAILY FAITH PRACTICES

## Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany (B) – 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

**Focus:** *Pursue Excellence in Serving Christ*

### word of life

**“Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it.”** (1 Corinthians 9:24 NRSV)

Read 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Pau is impassioned about being called and commissioned to be an apostle, sent to proclaim the gospel message of Jesus Christ. He is willing to adapt in order to make that proclamation relevant to his audience. (See 1 Corinthians 9:20-23.) If his audience is Jewish, then he willingly uses his own Jewish upbringing to find language and illustrations to tell the story of the long-awaited Messiah found in Jesus. If his audience is Gentile, then he seeks words, metaphors, and imagery which will be relevant to those listeners.

1. *Why is Paul so willing to adapt his words to his audience?*
2. *How does that make him a good preacher?*

Ultimately, Paul wants his listeners to know God through Jesus Christ so they might share in the blessings of the gospel. (See 1 Corinthians 9:23.) Paul demonstrates his point by shifting his focus to familiar athletic imagery, appropriate in a country which began the Olympic Games.

The town of Corinth, a port city on the Mediterranean Sea in mainland Greece, was located less than 100 miles from Olympia, home of the Olympic Games. The pursuit of excellence in sports was quite familiar. Greek games of Paul's time included boxing, wrestling, races, and other track events.

3. *What do you know of the early Olympic Games?*
4. *How helpful is it for you when preachers use sports images?*

Paul begins this section with his favorite phrase, “Do you not know. . .” (1 Corinthians 9:24 NRSV) followed by a question about running a race. Most people have either run a race or watched others do so. This is true if his audience includes Jews and Gentiles, free and slave, or rich and poor. Like Jesus with his parables, Paul seeks to find images relevant to his audience.

His point is not the race itself, but what it takes to win the race. Paul expects focused perseverance and effort. Athletes who win at their sport are single-minded throughout the preparation as well as at the event. “Run in such a way that you win it.” (1 Corinthian 9:24 NRSV) Paul is not making a point about defeating opponents, rather he is concerned about each person's commitment to winning the prize of Christ Jesus.

5. *Do you find this sport illustration helpful? How so?*
6. *Can only one person win the prize in regards to faith? Explain your answer.*

Athletes who win are at the top of their game, watching their diet, maintaining a disciplined exercise routine, and honing their athletic skills. If athletes hope to maintain success as they age, then they cannot slough off and rely on past glory moments. Instead, they persevere, keeping an eye on the prize. In other words, athletes do not train aimlessly. Boxers are not just beating the air, hoping to improve their skills. Runners are not just jogging in place.

7. *What does any of this have to do with the Christian?*

## **word among us**

Not all who compete get to hold up the trophy or win the prize. In fact, very few get to raise their hands in celebration of a victory. But those who experience success know how sweet it is.

1. *What does it feel like to win?*
2. *When (if ever) have you experienced victory at an athletic event?*
3. *What does it take for athletes to experience success at the top of their sports?*

Like a winning athlete in training, Paul is singularly focused on his objective – serving as an apostle of Jesus Christ to the best of his ability. Those are not empty words. He is not boxing at the air or dreaming of success. He is not offering excuses; nor is he pursuing other interests. Instead, Paul walks the talk by practicing self-discipline. He lives an intentional life which frees him to pursue his apostolic role with vigor, clarity, and passion. He competes with himself so he can better serve Christ as an apostle.

4. *What aspects of your life could you improve or strengthen through self-discipline?*
5. *How does a Christian hone skills?*

Sometimes we hear a heart-wrenching story of a track runner who trains for years for an important event, only to miss the start time of a race. Or we learn of another runner who steps out of the assigned lane or one who stumbles on the track. We can picture the pain on the faces of these athletes who miss their moment. Paul cautions us not to be disqualified by missing the calling of Christ.

6. *How might a Christian become disqualified?*
7. *For that matter, how does a Christian qualify for the race?*
8. *How are you in training as an athlete of Christ?*

## **faith practice in daily life**

### **Live Among God's People**

Paul is not saying we are competing *against* others inside or outside the church. That is not his point. Instead, each of us is called to be a spiritual athlete who is singularly focused on our event – living our life as a baptized believer of Jesus Christ. Each of us has a purpose with unique gifts to offer to the best of our abilities.

Not everyone can run a marathon; not all can sprint a short distance. Sometimes we get distracted or become complacent. We no longer offer our best to God. Nevertheless, each of us has a race to run, claiming the gifts of our baptism and God-given talents. The church through Bible studies, worship, prayer, and service can assist us to hone our skills and abilities to serve Christ. Paul urges us, “Run in such a way that you may win it.” (1 Corinthians 9:24 NRSV)

9. *What is your primary focus at this point of your life?*
10. *How does living among God's people help you stay focused on Christ?*
11. *How might you encourage others to become more disciplined in offering their gifts to the glory of God?*

### **Prayer**

Send your Spirit to focus our attention on the race before us, to encourage us when we are weary, and to keep us on your path of grace. In Christ, we pray. Amen.

## ***last word***

This week, increase your training as a Christian.

*Daily Faith Practices*

Written by John and Robin McCullough-Bade

Copyright © 2012 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

May be reproduced for local, non-sale use provided the above copyright notice is included.

[www.elca.org/faithpractices](http://www.elca.org/faithpractices)